

VA to Study Project SHAD Health Effects

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has contracted with the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to conduct a three-year, \$3 million study of potential long-term health effects of tests conducted on board Navy ships in the 1960s.

From 1963 through 1970, the Department of Defense (DoD) conducted tests to determine the effectiveness of shipboard detection and protective measures against chemical and biological threats and to determine the potential risk to American forces. The tests were conducted under the broad heading of Shipboard Hazard and Defense (SHAD).

Until recently, all information about the shipboard tests was classified. "We owe it to those veterans who participated in Project SHAD to find out if they have suffered any ill effects from the tests," Principi said. "If we find any medical problems or disabilities associated with Project SHAD, those veterans will receive the benefits they deserve."

IOM's formal epidemiological study will determine whether Project SHAD veterans are experiencing health problems due to exposures during military service. It will include both veterans receiving health care from VA and those not enrolled for VA care to be a valid scientific study, and to accurately determine the nature and causes of any health problems among these veterans.

The study will compare the health of veterans who participated in the SHAD tests more than 30 years ago with the health of veterans from the same era who served on ships not involved with the testing. The study will also compare the mortality rates.

Since May, VA officials has been notifying veterans who took part in Project SHAD tests. As further information is declassified, VA will continue to notify veterans who may have been affected. Veterans are encouraged to come to VA medical facilities if they believe they have medical problems caused by the tests.

Additional information about this study is on VA's Project SHAD Web site at www.va.gov/SHAD. ■

A "severely disabled veteran" is a veteran with service-connected disabilities rated at 50 percent or higher . . .

Severely Disabled Veterans Get Health Care Priority from VA under New Regulation

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Department of Veterans Affairs is establishing priority access to health care for severely disabled veterans under new regulations recently announced.

The phrase "severely disabled veteran" is an informal phrase for veterans with service-connected disabilities rated at 50 percent or higher.

"It is unacceptable to keep veterans with service-connected medical problems waiting for care," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi in a recent statement concerning the new regulation. "These veterans are the very reason we exist, and everything we do should focus first on their needs."

The new regulation is being implemented in two phases. Under the first phase, which is being implemented immediately, VA will provide priority access to health care for veterans with service-connected disabilities rated 50 percent or greater. This new priority includes hospitalization and outpatient care for both service-connected and non-service-connected treatment. VA will continue to treat immediately any veteran needing emergency care.

In the second phase, which will be implemented next year, VA will provide priority access to other service-connected veterans for their service-connected conditions.

The number of veterans using VA's health care system has risen dramatically in recent years, increasing from 2.9 million in 1995 to a projected 4.4 million in 2002. On a typical day, more than 54,400 veterans are inpatients in VA hospitals or nursing homes and more than 130,000 veterans receive VA outpatient care.

An additional 600,000 veterans are projected to enroll in VA health care in 2003. Unable to absorb this increase, VA has more than 280,000 veterans on waiting lists to receive medical care.

Additionally, an unknown, but significant number are receiving care from private physicians or are Medicare-eligible.

Approximately 48 percent of veterans enrolled in VA health care are 65 years and older. Additionally, many veterans enroll simply to establish a backup for their current medical care or they may be receiving care at one VA facility, but seeking care at a more convenient site.

This fall, VA will implement a new computer application at all facilities that will provide more current and more complete information about the number of patients waiting for VA care. Information from the computer application will include the number of veterans rated 50 percent or greater.

To receive health care, veterans generally must be enrolled with VA. Veterans do not have to enroll if they have a service-connected disability rated 50 percent or more, or if they seek care for a service-connected disability.

Although VA operates more than 1,300 sites of care, including 163 hospitals and more than 800 outpatient clinics, the increase in veterans seeking care outstrips VA's capacity to treat them.

"VA provides the finest health care in the country, but if a veteran cannot see a doctor in a timely manner, then we have failed that veteran," said Principi.

"I will work to honor our commitment to veterans," he added. "But when it comes to non-emergency health care, we must give the priority to veterans with severe service-connected disabilities."

It is important to understand that any veteran-patient regardless of service connection will be seen promptly if a medical condition warrants immediate treatment. ■



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Special Note:
Veterans' Day Parade
Downtown Houston
November 11, 2002
Call (713) 845-1220
for event details.

Many people with heart failure are not aware they have it . . .

Heart Failure: Knowledge Makes a Difference in Quality of Life

HOUSTON, TX - Heart failure affects nearly five million Americans of all ages and is responsible for more hospitalizations than all forms of cancer combined. Over 400,000 new cases of heart failure will be diagnosed next year.

Yet many people with heart failure are not aware they have it. This is because some of the most common symptoms of heart failure, such as feeling tired and short of breath, are often mistaken for normal signs of getting older. Also, people may try to avoid symptoms by making lifestyle changes such as taking the elevator instead of the stairs, sleeping with extra pillows, or cutting back on their favorite sports.

For the VA health care system, heart failure is a particularly high volume condition. In 1999, heart failure accounted for 17,000 VA hospital stays.

There is an increasing amount of research that suggests that many of these hospitalizations are preventable by improving the overall coordination of in-patient and outpatient care. This research suggests that comprehensive care programs can reduce hospitalizations, lower medical costs, and improve overall health of congestive heart failure (CHF) patients.

In light of these facts, the CHF QUERI (Quality Enhancement Research Initiative) Coordinating Center at the VA's Houston Center for Quality of Care & Utilization Studies, led by Dr. Nelda Wray, developed the CHF Coordinated Care Program. The program was conducted at from October 2001 through October 2002 and was designed to improve the coordination of care of patients with CHF.

The program has three main objectives:

- ✓ To ensure that patients admitted to the hospital for worsening heart failure meet standards for discharge from the hospital before they are discharged.

- ✓ To provide CHF patients and families with information concerning the importance of taking medications correctly, restricting salt intake, and weighing daily.

- ✓ To provide intensive follow up of CHF patients including clinic visits, telephone calls and on-going education and reinforcement.

Preliminary findings for this project indicate that there was a reduction in readmissions for the patients enrolled in the project and that the patients were very satisfied with the care they received while participating in the project.



For the VA health care system, heart failure is a particularly high volume condition. In 1999, heart failure accounted for 17,000 VA hospital stays. There is an increasing amount of research that suggests comprehensive care programs can reduce hospitalizations and improve overall health of congestive heart failure patients. Above, Barbara Guillory, RN, reviews educational materials on heart failure with Houston VA Medical Center veteran, Malcom Johnson. In most cases, heart failure cannot be cured, but it can be brought under control with careful work on the patient's part.

How can I learn to live with heart failure?

There are many things that you can do to help yourself. These activities include:

- ✓ *Stop smoking.*
- ✓ *Drink alcohol sparingly, if at all.*
- ✓ *Limit your intake of salt.*

Learn what prepared foods have large amounts of salt. Give yourself time to get used to eating a low salt diet. As you adjust, you may find that foods are more flavorful in a different way. Learning to read the nutritional information provided on food labels can help with awareness of how much salt is in foods.

- ✓ *Weigh yourself every day.* A sudden weight gain is one sign that you may be retaining fluid. Contact your health care provider if your weight changes significantly.

- ✓ *Exercise at levels recommended by your physician.* We used to believe that people with heart failure should rest often. In fact, regular exercise could improve your ability to function, decrease your symptoms, and strengthen your heart. Walking, cycling, and swimming are types of aerobic exercise recommended for patients with heart failure. Slowly increase the time, distance, and pace that you exercise. Your doctor can help you plan your exercise program.

- ✓ *Take your medications.* Take medications as directed by your physician. Never change or stop a medicine without checking with your doctor. Keep an updated medication list and carry it with you to all of your doctor visits. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking over-the-counter medications and supplements.

- ✓ *Maintain frequent visits to your physician* and notifying him or her if there are any changes in your symptoms.

- ✓ *Understand what heart failure is*, what the symptoms are, what you should do if your symptoms change, and how your doctor treats this disease. Your doctor can answer these questions.

Many people with heart failure lead normal, active lives. They do so because they have learned to take good care of themselves. You can take control of heart failure by understanding and carefully following your treatment plan.

To learn more about the CHF QUERI Program, please contact Donna Espadas, CHF QUERI Center Manager, at (713) 794-8673. ■ Donna Espadas and Mary York, Houston Center for Quality of Care & Utilization Studies

A Word from the Director . . .

Honoring Our Veterans

HOUSTON, TX - Veterans Day is our nation's opportunity to honor those men and women who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces. There will be parades and speeches and other ceremonies to try to acknowledge the tremendous contributions veterans have made to our country and the world.

This past year the Houston VA Medical Center celebrated the liberation of France during World War II by having the French Consulate present certificates of appreciation to veterans. We celebrated the liberation of South Korea with special presentations by the South Korean Consul. We honored POWs from all conflicts with a memorable keynote speech by an ex-POW of the Vietnam War. We were also reminded of the faith and suffering of the families of those still Missing in Action by the presence of Mrs. Geneva Martinez at our POW/MIA program. Ms. Martinez is the mother of SGT Rudy Becerra, MIA in Vietnam for 30 years, who was finally found and returned to his family.

We also recognize our employees who are veterans. At every level and discipline, many of our staff members are veterans whose special bond with



Edgar L. Tucker, Medical Center Director

those we serve contributes to our medical facility's success.

Throughout the year, we hold special events to honor veterans for their love of country and their tremendous sacrifices. These individuals and their acts of courage make ours, the greatest nation in the world. Every day, the Houston VA Medical Center delivers health care services to veterans who seek care. We understand that our ability to do this well reflects on our nation's commitment to "Care for him who shall have born the battle." That is why our staff is proud of the recent JCAHO survey results that validated their outstanding efforts to provide quality care.

Veterans Day. A very special tribute to America's heroes. This day has extra meaning for the employees of the Houston VA Medical Center because of their commitment to our mission to serve veterans. ■

Houston VA Women's Health Center - A Unique Place for Women

HOUSTON, TX - When you think about the veterans who visit the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC), you usually don't think of females. However, the HVAMC Women's Health Center had 4,500 visits last year, and that number continues to increase.

Of the 4.3 million veterans who currently use the VA health care system, 4.5 percent are women. Of current active duty military, women account for approximately 15 percent of the force. This means that the number of women using the VA health care system will most certainly increase in the future. VA has accepted the challenge of providing equitable access to health care services to these veterans.

"While all veterans require convenient access to primary care, medical subspecialty care, mental health services, and long-term care, women also have some special needs that include access to gynecology and reproductive health services. These later needs are, in part, the result of the unique demographics of the women veterans population," said Robert H. Roswell, M.D., under secretary for health, Department of Veterans Affairs.

The HVAMC places top priority in providing high quality health care services to the growing number of women veterans. While women veterans are entitled to the same health care benefits as male veterans, there are special programs and services available to meet their unique health care needs.

The Women's Health Center at the HVAMC, which opened its doors in 1996, is dedicated to providing primary care, preventive health care, reproductive care, and a host of other health care services. It also offers social work services, survivor groups for sexual trauma and breast cancer, CHAMPVA Program, pregnancy care program, mammography, and infertility services.

Shirley LaDay Smith, RN, MSN, HVAMC Women Veterans Program Coordinator, calls the Center "an



Women's Health Center nurse Earlie Horace Thorn, RN (right) discusses breast self-examinations with veterans Barbara Davidson (left) and Marcia Spears. The Women's Health Center is responsible for scheduling and coordinating mammographies for women veterans. A Breast Clinic is open for patient consultations regarding abnormal breast findings. A physician assistant in the Women's Health Center facilitates well-women health screenings, including pap and breast exams.

outpatient clinic tailor-made for women."

The Center, located on the fifth floor of the HVAMC, offers a variety of specialty clinics. These clinics include the Primecare Clinic, Gynecology Clinic, Breast Clinic, Compensation & Pension Clinic, Women's Preventive Medicine Clinic, Psychiatry Clinic, and the Nutrition Clinic.

The Gynecology Clinic provides evaluation and management of acute gynecology problems and annual gynecological examinations.

Mammography services are contracted to an outside breast imaging facility. The Women's Health Center is responsible for scheduling and coordinating the mammographies. However, a Breast Clinic is open for

patient consultations regarding abnormal breast findings. A physician assistant in the Women's Health Center facilitates well-women health screenings, including pap and breast exams.

"For breast cancer education, videos are available on breast health, breast cancer, and self-examination. There is also a breast team of 14 different services that collaborate in improving the care of patients with breast cancer," said Ms. Smith. "As for Primecare needs, Dr. Lydia Quinones, the primecare physician for the Women's Health Center, sees patients Monday through Friday."

Pregnancy care services for women veterans are contracted out to the Harris County Hospital District. Both female and male veterans are eligible for infertility services.

"We will continue to assure that women veterans have equal access to high-quality care. We are changing the culture in VA with clinical guidelines, performance measures, quality improvement, improved patient safety, and veteran-relevant research to prepare for the veterans of tomorrow, which, I can assure you, will include many more women veterans," said Dr. Roswell.

The Women's Health Center at the HVAMC caters to the special needs of their women veterans. Volunteers with the Women Veterans of America carry out bedside visits to women hospitalized in the HVAMC, and offer comfort items and gifts of cheer. The HVAMC Voluntary Section, in conjunction with the American Legion Auxiliary, provide a free mobile hair care service that includes shampoo, set, trim, and blow dry for hospitalized women veterans.

If you are interested in more information about the HVAMC Women's Health Center, please contact Ms. Smith, the HVAMC Women Veterans Program Coordinator, at (713) 794-7926. ■ Nikki Verbeck, Administrative Assistant, External Affairs

Classes are free and no co-payment will be charged . . .

Lufkin Outpatient Clinic Offers Hypertension Classes

LUFKIN, TX - Free Hypertension Classes are offered at the Lufkin Outpatient Clinic (LOPC), the first Thursday of each month at 2 p.m. Veterans and their family members are invited to attend.

Hypertension, also called high blood pressure, is a major health problem in the world today. 50 million Americans have it - that's about one in every four adults. In 1998, it was directly responsible for more than 44,000 deaths and it contributed to the deaths of another 210,000 Americans.

Hypertension is sometimes called "the silent killer" because it doesn't have any symptoms, yet it can be causing serious damage inside the body. It is a primary cause of stroke, heart disease, heart failure, kidney disease, and blindness.

This class offered at the LOPC will help you to control your hypertension by learning to:

- ✓ Diet
- ✓ Comply with your medication instructions.
- ✓ Understand your blood pressure numbers
- ✓ Take your blood pressure
- ✓ Understand the risks of high blood pressure.

Your health is important to us. Ask your nurse, your Primecare provider, or stop by the LOPC front desk to get registered for this class. ■

Bladder Infection Study

HOUSTON, TX - Are you having a problem with repeated bladder infections that are a result of a prior spinal cord injury?

The Houston VA Medical Center is investigating a new therapy that may help prevent urinary tract infections (UTI) in people who have a spinal cord injury.

Study subjects are now being enrolled for a 12 month, placebo-controlled clinical trial. The purpose of the trial is to see how well the new treatment prevents UIT as compared with a placebo treatment.

If you are interested in participating in the study or would like more information, please contact the study coordinator, Colleen Stewart, RN at (713) 794-7127. ■



The Women's Health Center is dedicated to providing primary care, preventive health care, reproductive care, and a host of other health care services. The clinics available to women veterans include the Primecare Clinic, Gynecology Clinic, Breast Clinic, Compensation & Pension Clinic, Women's Preventive Medicine Clinic, Psychiatry Clinic, and the Nutrition Clinic. Above, Women's Health Center nurse Earlie Horace Thorn, RN meets with veteran Marilyn Gonzales.

We're Here to Help . . .

Cancer Support Group

Meets the first Tuesday of every month, 1-2 p.m. in the Nursing Unit (NU) 4D dayroom. Group facilitator: Lisa Whipple and Chaplain Doug Ensminger, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5273

Pain Support Group

Meets every Wednesday and Thursday, 2 p.m. in Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Dr. Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Education Group

Meets every Wednesday, 1 p.m. in Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Dr. Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Coping Skills Group

Meets every Thursday, 1 p.m. in Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Dr. Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Better Breather's Club

Meets last Wednesday, 1:30-3:30 p.m. in Room 1C-361. Group facilitator: Paula Denman, (713) 794-7317

Stroke Support Group

Meets second and fourth Thursdays, 3 p.m. in the NU 2A Rehab Dining Room. Group facilitator: Laura Lawhon and Tommie Espinosa, (713) 794-1414, ext. 4241/5254

Amputee Support Group

Meets first and third Thursdays, 3 p.m. in the NU 2A Rehab Dining Room. Group facilitator: Betty Baer or Roger McDonald, (713) 794-1414, ext. 3354/4218

Prostate Cancer Support Group

Meets third Thursdays, 2 p.m. in Room 4C-122. Group facilitator: Lillie Sonnier, (713) 794-1414, ext. 7111

Walking into a clinic, whether in Houston, Lufkin, or Beaumont, without an appointment as an unscheduled patient means frustrating, long waits . . .

Contacting Your Primecare Provider Between Appointments

LUFKIN, TX - Do you have problems contacting or communicating with your Primecare Provider or Nurse between appointments? Have you had difficulty in talking to your Primecare Provider when you have experienced problems or needs between your scheduled appointments? Do you know you have been assigned a Primecare Provider? Do you know who that person is and how to contact them?

For most people, changes in health status and the need to contact your Primecare Provider between appointments is a given and will occur. Walking into a clinic, whether in Houston, Lufkin, or Beaumont without an appointment as an unscheduled patient is not an effective solution.

If you "call us first" we will be able to get you an appointment which will mean your care will be more efficient and coordinated.

Just a little study and planning ahead will give you information or means that are essential in making sure you successfully contact and communicate your needs to your Primecare Provider.

The following are a few suggestions to make this go smoother.

First, early in your visit, pay close attention to the name of your Primecare Provider and Nurse.

Ask who will be your Primecare team members. Ask who will be your contact person. If you are not seeing your Primecare Provider, ask to whom you have been assigned. Patients in

Primecare have been enrolled with one provider, nurse and team.

Make sure you have the telephone number of the contact person. Ask if she or he has a calling card with a name and telephone number.

Ask how you should place the call, to whom and when you may expect telephone calls to be returned.

When you receive a calling card and number, make sure to file it in an easily retrievable place.

If no calling card is available, write the name and number in an organizer where you will always know the location.

Inform your family of the name of your Primecare Provider and Nurse as well as where you have placed the names and numbers.

Ask what you should do if an emergency occurs? Primecare Clinics do not give emergency care. Be sure you know what you should do and where should you call or go if you have a true emergency?

Before leaving, make sure you have all of your questions answered concerning who, when and how you will communicate any potential health problems or needs.



Lufkin Outpatient Clinic Nurse Manager Myrtle Welch, RN, MSN takes veteran and LOPC staff member, Barbara Baker's blood pressure. During your first visit, it's helpful to pay close attention to the name of your Primecare Provider and Nurse and remember it for future use. Ask who will be your Primecare team members. Ask who will be your contact person. If you are not seeing your Primecare Provider, ask to whom have you been assigned.

And finally, remember that help is just a telephone call away. Professionally trained, registered nurses at the VA Network Telecare Center are ready to help answer veteran health care questions 24/7. That's right - 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Telecare nurses are trained to provide symptom analysis, answer medication questions, explain lab test results, educate patients about specific diseases, and check appointments. The VA Network Telecare Center is not for life-threatening emergencies. If you have a life-threatening emergency, immediately call 911.

If you have medical questions or concerns and cannot wait until your next appointment, or would like to schedule or cancel an appointment, the VA Network Telecare Center can be called anytime at (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1 (800) 639-5137. ■ Myrtle Welch, R.N., M.S.N., Nurse Manager, Lufkin Outpatient Clinic

As the holiday season approaches, the smell of good home cooking and a few extra inches around the waist come to mind . . .

Eat Smart This Holiday Season

HOUSTON, TX - As the holiday season approaches, the smell of good home cooking and a few extra inches around the waist come to mind. But take heart, there are ways to enjoy all the wonderful food without worrying about weight gain during the holidays.

All foods, even traditional holiday treats, can fit into a healthful eating plan for the weight conscious. The secret to enjoying and celebrating at parties, holiday festivities, and other social gatherings is moderation and balance.

Here are some tips to help you eat well and enjoy the holiday season.

✓ **Be realistic** and don't try to lose weight during the holiday season. Try to maintain your current weight by balancing party meals with your other meals. Eat small, lower calorie meals during the day so you can enjoy the celebration and

food without adding extra inches around the waistline.

✓ **Avoid overeating.** Eat a small low-fat snack before you attend the festivities so that hunger doesn't get the best of you. Drink a low-calorie beverage or, better yet, water, before running to the buffet and do plenty of socializing since conversation is calorie-free.

✓ **Make just one trip to the buffet line.** Be selective and choose only foods you really want to eat and make the portions small. Also, when socializing, stay away from the buffet table to avoid nibbling.

✓ **Choose lower calorie party foods.** Eat raw vegetables with a small amount of dip, boiled shrimp, or scallops and to help ensure there are healthy treats, bring a vegetable or fruit tray.

✓ **Be active and keep moving.** Walk the isles of the mall, go ice-skating, or plan a party that involves some kind of physical activity (bowling, dancing, etc.).

✓ **Share the holiday spirit as well as the food.** Share holiday treats with a friend so you don't eat them all yourself.

✓ **Eat breakfast or a snack before conquering the mall.** Shopping on an empty stomach can lead to an overblown lunch.

Try these tips and remember moderation is the key to enjoying all the holiday food and fun. ■ Brandy Hodge, HVAMC Dietetic Intern

Two major causes behind the nursing shortage are the availability of nurse faculty and decreased enrollment into nursing schools . . .

VA Clinical Care and Local Houston Universities Forming Bold Partnerships to Address Nursing Shortage

HOUSTON, TX – It is a known fact that availability of nursing staff has a significant impact on patient care outcomes. With the decreased enrollment of students into nursing schools the nursing shortage has potential to get much worse before it gets better.

Two major causes behind the nursing shortage are the availability of nurse faculty and decreased enrollment into nursing schools. Clinical care in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is concerned about these causes as well as two of its other missions, education and research.

In 1963, the Veterans Affairs (VA) Nursing Service was first in the profession to establish a position for doctorally-prepared nurse researchers, formalizing the research function within VA Nursing Service. Today, 44 nurse principal investigators conduct research within VA full-time, focusing their study and investigation on improvement of patient care. Many more VA nurses are involved in specific research projects.

VHA believes it is imperative that enrollment in nursing schools increase to have an adequate workforce to meet patient care demands currently and in the future. Nursing faculty are aging and their availability is decreasing for a number of reasons, not the least of which is salaries. Recognizing that there is a need for nurses to teach as well as provide clinical care, the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC) and local universities are taking bold steps to address these problems.

In FY 1999, VA proposed new nurse qualifications standards and launched a new education assistance initiative to support it. VA committed \$50 million to assist VA nurses seeking baccalaureate degrees in nursing and adopted new performance standards requiring a four-year degree for registered nurses by 2005.



Cynthia Andrus, RN, MSN, (standing) the senior nurse consultant for the HVAMC Mental Health Care Line provides clinical instruction for nursing students from the University of Texas. Just recently, HVAMC nursing staff members have been allowed the time and opportunity to serve as primary nursing faculty for nursing students in their clinical rotations at the VA medical facility. Nurses, like Ms. Andrus, take this additional responsibility very seriously.

Emphasis on education in the VA system has had a positive impact and many of the nurses employed at the HVAMC have either a Master or Doctoral degree.

Just recently, HVAMC nursing staff members have been allowed the time and opportunity to serve as primary nursing faculty for nursing students in their clinical rotations at the VA medical facility. These nurses are very committed and take this additional responsibility very seriously.

The nurses have completed orientation for their new responsibilities at local universities and began their additional duties in September. In addition, they continue to carry major clinical functions in their respective roles at the VA.

VA nursing has a very proud history and the HVAMC continues to build

upon that legacy in an effort to have available qualified workforce to care for our veterans.

For more than 50 years, Houston VA Medical Center staff has provided clinical training for health care professionals through affiliations with Baylor College of Medicine and 85 other educational and research institutions.

As a member institution of the Texas Medical Center (TMC) since 1985, HVAMC staff members serve on various TMC oversight committees that contribute to improve patient care and hospital operations. Today, an increasing number of HVAMC nursing staff are receiving faculty appointments. ■ *Deloris W. Leftridge, RN, MSN, CNAA, Chief Nurse Executive/Clinical Practice Office*

Military personnel who recently served in a combat zone are eligible for two years of free medical care . . .

VA Cares for Combat Theater Veterans

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Military personnel who recently served in a combat zone are eligible for two years of free medical care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for most conditions.

"We are able to help the newest generation of combat veterans serving in Afghanistan and engaged in the war against terrorism in ways not available to previous generations of veterans," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi.

Most veterans must prove that a medical problem is connected to their military service to receive free VA care for that condition, or they must have relatively low incomes. Since Nov. 11, 1998, VA has been authorized to provide

free medical care for some veterans within two years after leaving active duty. Those veterans must have served in a combat zone or in comparable hostilities. They don't have to prove either a service-connection for their health care problems or that they have low incomes.

The benefit does not cover treatment for medical problems clearly unrelated to military service, such as care for common colds, injuries from accidents that happened after discharge from active duty and disorders that existed before joining the military.

To receive free medical care, veterans must be able to show that they served since Nov. 11, 1998 in a theater of combat operations or in combat against a hostile force. The coverage lasts

for two years after discharge from active duty. It applies to VA hospital care, outpatient services and nursing home care.

"National Guard and reserve personnel, who serve alongside their active-duty comrades in combat will, in most cases, be eligible," said Dr. Robert Roswell, VA's Under Secretary for Health.

After two years, these veterans will be subject to the same eligibility and enrollment rules as other veterans.

"This benefit builds upon the lessons learned from the undiagnosed illnesses of Gulf War veterans and Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange," said Principi. "Combat veterans should not wait for medical care while we weigh the evidence linking their problems to military service." ■

25 Most Asked Questions from Women Veterans

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The most frequently asked questions from women veterans – along with the answers – can now be found on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Web site. The information will soon be available in Spanish.

"These 25 questions are the ones we hear most often," said Dr. Irene Trowell-Harris, director of the Center for Women Veterans. "Too many women veterans don't know that they are eligible for the full range of VA benefits. Too many are unaware of special programs VA runs for them."

Dr. Trowell-Harris said the information will be helpful to male veterans, too.

Topics include the services available to women veterans; information about gender-specific services (including pap smears, mammography, and pre-natal and child care); evaluations for nursing home care; and employment options.

The Web site, www.va.gov/womenvet, offers women veterans direct access to the Center for Women Veterans where they can express concerns, ask questions and provide feedback about VA benefits and services.

Congress passed legislation in 1994 authorizing VA to establish a Center for Women Veterans. The center collaborates with other federal departments on issues related to women veterans, develops materials on VA benefits programs and health care services, and conducts outreach to make women veterans aware of these services. ■

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Volunteers Needed for Insomnia Study

HOUSTON, TX - The Houston VA Medical Center's (HVAMC) Sleep Disorders Center is currently conducting a research study to test the effectiveness and safety of an investigational medication for the treatment of insomnia.

The Sleep Disorders Center is looking for healthy, adult, men and women who meet all of the following study criteria:

- ✓ Do NOT have insomnia.
- ✓ Are 21 to 64 years old.
- ✓ Are not pregnant.
- ✓ Are in good physical and mental health.
- ✓ Sleep well and DO NOT have any sleep problems.

Participation in this study will require one clinic visit and one overnight stay at the HVAMC Sleep Disorders Center. Duration of the study is one to two weeks. Volunteers will be compensated for their time and travel.

For further information on this study, call Charmaine Brown, senior research coordinator, at (713) 794-7896. ■

Trouble Breathing? Feeling Down?

HOUSTON, TX - Are you a veteran who has trouble breathing because of emphysema, asthma, or bronchitis? Are you feeling sad, down, or worried?

If so, call now to learn about the exciting new RADAR program at the Houston VA Medical Center.

RADAR stands for Research Aimed at Depression and Anxiety Reduction. This study examines if an education program can help people with these types of problems. It is made up of 8 weekly classes, each lasting an hour.

Participants will be asked to answer some questions about how you are doing and feeling half way through the classes (week four) and after the last class (week eight). Then they will come back to answer similar questions at four months, eight months and 12 months after completing the classes.

There is no cost to participate in the study. The program is free to those who decide to join the study. Participants may also receive compensation for completing the entire study.

If you are interested in learning more about the study, please contact the RADAR Program at (713) 794-8692.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. ■

The Substance Dependence Treatment Program at the Houston VA Medical Center provides many different services for veterans suffering from alcohol or drug abuse . . .

What Can the VA Substance Dependence Treatment Program Do for You?

HOUSTON, TX - The Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC) provides a comprehensive treatment program for veterans with substance dependence problems. The Substance Dependence Treatment Program (SDTP) at the HVAMC provides many different services for veterans suffering from alcohol or drug abuse:

- Psychiatric care
- Psychological assessments
- Social work services, including referral for housing and other assistance
- Referral for medical care
- Vocational counseling
- Opiate replacement (methadone) therapy
- Education about addiction
- Relapse prevention skills
- Family education
- On-going support to keep up a recovering lifestyle
- Case management

Veterans start with a screening interview at the clinic, where they are assigned to a case manager. They begin treatment immediately at the least restrictive level of care appropriate for their situation. Eventually they may go through several parts of the program.

SDTP offers the following levels of care: detoxification, partial hospitalization, high-intensity treatment (HIT), and low-intensity treatment (LIT).

Detoxification

If needed, the veteran will receive detoxification by intensive outpatient monitoring or brief hospitalization.

"Detox" is designed to safely stabilize veterans at higher risk for medical complications of alcohol or drug withdrawal. Then the individual can move on to learning skills for staying clean and sober.

Partial Hospitalization

This is the most intensive level of care in the program. It is often the starting point for individuals who are homeless, have relapsed many times, or have serious medical or psychiatric problems. In this level, veterans attend treatment five days a week, from 7:30 a.m. to approximately 2:00 p.m.

Treatment emphasizes stabilizing the veteran's sobriety, living situation, and any serious psychiatric or medical problems. The program provides breakfast, lunch, and, for those without resources, transportation via bus tokens.

Most veterans in partial hospitalization will attend at least two weeks, but the length of time will vary depending on the needs of the individual.

High Intensity Treatment (HIT)

In this level of care, veterans attend treatment four days a week for one to two hours each morning. Treatment includes support groups, educational groups, relapse prevention groups, vocational rehabilitation, recreational therapy, and occupational therapy.

As with other levels of care, the length of stay in this level varies with the needs of the individual.

Low Intensity Treatment (LIT)

In this level of care, veterans attend therapy two days per week. LIT is

offered in both the mornings and the evenings, for the convenience of the individual.

LIT has three phases. The first phase is for stabilization and education. The second phase emphasizes understanding and developing relapse prevention skills. The third phase, Aftercare (one hour per week), provides the long-term safe environment to discuss difficulties and successes in the recovery process.

Veterans may be in LIT up to 6 months or longer if needed. The program offers an alumni group when veterans complete formal treatment.

Family Involvement

If family is available, the program considers their involvement to be extremely important. Family members can attend family education groups or on-going family support groups during the veteran's treatment.

The program also encourages veterans and their family members to attend supportive, recovery-based community groups as an important addition to VA care.

Admission

Veterans can be referred to the SDTP directly by their primary care provider or through the Psychiatric Evaluation and Admission Clinic (PEAC). Call (713) 794-7900 during regular business hours for more information.

For mental health emergencies during nights, weekends, and holidays, please call the HVAMC operator at (713) 791-1414 and ask for the psychiatrist on call. ■

The system is designed to teach residents all the components of pain, including the psychological and social issues that can cause pain to linger . . .

VA Teaches Doctors of the Future about Pain Management

HOUSTON, TX - Local anesthetics will make the pain go away temporarily, but managing pain long-term may take a broader approach.

At a Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC) Pain Clinic, anesthesiology staff members are training residents from Baylor College of Medicine to care for patients with chronic pain by looking beyond the physical discomfort.

"You often can't correct the whole problem with a needle," said Dr. Burdett S. Dunbar, chairman of Baylor's anesthesiology department. "Most patients with chronic pain have a lot more going on in their lives than just the pain. We now know it is just as important to deal with the issues that seem unrelated in a patient's life as the pain itself."

The HVAMC Pain Clinic offers residents a unique opportunity to get a "big picture" view of pain management. It is a place where they can care for

patients, but with direct supervision from an experienced health care professional. The system is designed to teach the residents all the components of pain, including the psychological and social issues that can cause pain to linger.

"Multidisciplinary pain management, with special emphasis on psychosocial issues, in addition to state-of-the-art pharmacotherapy and invasive pain procedures, has taken pain medicine from embryonic stages to a mature, independent, and respectable specialty that fascinates many physicians in the training process," said Dr. Bilal F. Shanti, chief of the Houston VA Medical Center Pain Section.

In the past, anesthesiology residents rotated to numerous locations throughout the city of Houston for required pain management training.

"It's a big plus to have this effort in house now," said Dunbar. "There is a consistency in the approach to the care

of patients that is very good for our residents."

The presence of Baylor anesthesiology residents is also advantageous for the Houston VA Medical Center, Dunbar said. "Pain management has been a major push at the VA for several years, so this has been tremendous for both the care of patients at the VA and Baylor's educational efforts."

The HVAMC established a Pain Clinic under the Anesthesiology Service in May 2001. The mission of the section is to heighten awareness of the field of pain medicine, educate health care providers about this very frequent symptom, educate patients and their families, and deliver state-of-the-art pain management to our veterans.

The Pain Clinic is located on the fifth floor in the new surgery clinics. For more information, call (713) 791-1414, extension 6477. ■ *John Tyler, Baylor College of Medicine*

HIV is spreading throughout the world with 15,000 new cases appearing each day . . .

DNA-based HIV Vaccine Under Development at Houston VA

HOUSTON, TX – The fight against HIV/AIDS needs a shot in the arm, or better yet, an oral vaccine.

Researchers at the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC) are working to develop a genetic vaccine against HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. The virus is spreading throughout the world with 15,000 new cases appearing each day. A majority of those cases are in developing countries.

"With the easy travel existing between most countries, the high frequency of infection in many countries, and the long period after infection before symptoms appear, HIV is going to be a threat to everyone in future generations," said Dr. Frank Orson, a staff physician in allergy and immunology at the HVAMC. "An effective vaccine is the only way to combat this epidemic in the long run."

Through a VA Merit Review grant, Orson and other HVAMC researchers are utilizing animal studies to aid efforts to develop a DNA-based HIV vaccine.

"Our primary focus is on development of an oral vaccine that would provide immune protection in the genital mucosa, the entry site for most HIV infections," said Orson, who is also an associate professor of medicine, immunology, and molecular virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine. "If successful, this type of

immune protection would block sexual transmission of the virus."

Genetic immunization uses a circular piece of DNA called a plasmid that includes the genetic instructions for producing a specific protein, in this case a protein from an HIV strain.

"The plasmid is the delivery vehicle for the vaccine. When inserted in a cell, it tells the cell to produce the protein," Orson said. "When the cell produces the protein, it is recognized as foreign and the immune system is triggered."

Key in the immune defense system are cytotoxic T lymphocytes, known as CTLs. "The CTLs are especially good at smoking out virus-infected cells and killing them," Orson said. "Once activated, they can even kill newly infected cells before they have a chance to produce the virus and that stops the spread of the infection."

This type of oral vaccine will initially stimulate both antibody and CTL responses in the mucosa of the gastrointestinal tract, but the benefit will spill over into other mucosal tissues.

Vaccine delivery by aerosol to the lung is under investigation as another means of stimulating the mucosal system. Whatever means of delivery, the vaccine will need to be effective for many HIV strains.

"With HIV, there is a constant shift in the structure of these proteins because

the virus makes random changes to its genetic code every time it reproduces in a newly infected cell," Orson said. "If we can design the vaccine to handle multiple variations, we will be able to achieve better protection against the moving target of HIV."

Orson's VA research team is utilizing mice to investigate the immune response and is collaborating with researchers at Texas A&M University in studies of feline immunodeficiency virus.

"An oral genetic vaccine has many potential advantages," Orson said. "It would be easy to transport, should require no refrigeration, and won't need trained medical personnel or sophisticated medical equipment for vaccine administration."

Genetic vaccine delivery systems for HIV also have implications for research



Photo by Sharon D. Jones, HVAMC Media Section

Researchers at the Houston VA Medical Center are working to develop a genetic vaccine against HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. "An oral genetic vaccine has many potential advantages," said Dr. Frank Orson, a staff physician in allergy and immunology at the HVAMC. "It would be easy to transport, should require no refrigeration, and won't need trained medical personnel or sophisticated medical equipment for vaccine administration."

in vaccines against other conditions such as allergic disease, influenza, pneumonia and cancer, as well as vaccines against biological warfare microorganisms.

Supported with more than \$12 million annually, research conducted by HVAMC scientists and physicians ensures veterans access to cutting-edge medical and health care technology. ■ Katherine Hoffman, HVAMC Research and Development

Don't Let the Flu Bug Bite You This Year

HOUSTON, TX - Flu season is again on its way, and will probably arrive in Houston just after Christmas. By far, the best defense against this devastating illness is to get a flu shot in October or November before the flu arrives. At the Houston VA Medical Center (HVAMC),

we began giving flu shots to veterans in mid-September.

In the United States, flu is responsible for around 114,000 hospitalizations and 20,000 deaths each year. Although most flu occurs in children, it is the most dangerous to people over 65 years of

age or people with medical conditions that make them more likely to have flu complications. Flu complications include pneumonia or the worsening of acute or chronic respiratory diseases.

Flu shots are highly recommended for people over 50 years of age; adults or children with a chronic heart or lung disease including asthma; adults or children who have had regular medical follow-up for chronic metabolic diseases like diabetes, renal disease, hemoglobinopathies, or immunosuppression from, for example, medications or HIV; residents of nursing homes or other chronic care facilities that house persons of any age with chronic medical conditions; and women who will be in their second or third semester of pregnancy during the flu season.

At the HVAMC, we take very seriously the recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control that all employees who work with people at high risk of flu and its complications should get flu shots. It is for that reason the HVAMC has a very important and successful Employee Vaccination Program whose goal is to protect our veterans.

Flu viruses change enough each year that everyone must get vaccinated each year with the newest flu vaccine. Last year's vaccine won't last through this year, nor will last year's vaccine match the strains

of flu virus that are expected to circulate this coming flu season.

We often hear of people who refuse the flu shot because it made them sick once. There are two explanations for this.

First, the vaccine is made of dead vaccine material and can't make you sick, but the body does not know the difference between the vaccine material and the real live flu virus. As a result, in addition to the desired immune response to protect you from flu, the body fights the vaccine with a slight temperature that may cause some aches and pains like a real cold. This is a natural response of the body and is stronger in some people than in others. Remember, if your body responds to this little bit of vaccine material, imagine what it will do with an invading army of aggressive prolific virus.

The other reason flu shots are blamed for making someone sick is timing. When we are vaccinating against the flu, there are at least four other "cold" viruses that march through Houston. Many times, we give someone a shot the day or two before they come down with unrelated cold. This is just unlucky timing, and is not related to the vaccine.

If you have questions about whether you should or can have a flu shot, talk to your Primecare Provider. ■ Charles E. Wright, PhD, HVAMC Preventive Medicine Coordinator



Photo by Sharon D. Jones, HVAMC Media Section

Primecare nurse, Nancy Ferguson, LVN, gives veteran H. W. Strain his annual flu shot. In the United States, flu is responsible for around 114,000 hospitalizations and 20,000 deaths each year. Although most flu occurs in children, it is the most dangerous to people over 65 years of age or people with medical conditions that make them more likely to have flu complications. Flu complications include pneumonia or the worsening of acute or chronic respiratory diseases.

om our Veterans

Provided by the Consumer Affairs Staff
HVAMC Room 1B-370, (713) 794-7883

Question: Am I eligible for VA health care?

Answer: In order for you to be eligible for enrollment for health care, you must have: (1) Been discharged from active military service under honorable conditions, (2) Served a minimum of 2 years if discharged after September 7, 1980 (prior to this date there is no time limit), and (3) If a National Guardsman or Reservist, served the entire period for which you were called to active duty other than for training purposes only.

Question: Will I be seen for my nonservice-connected condition?

Answer: If you are enrolled, you will receive care that includes treatment for service-connected and nonservice-connected disabilities. Your physician will determine what is medically indicated and provide that care.

Question: Am I eligible for a nursing home?

Answer: Veterans requiring nursing home care for a service-connected

condition or a veteran rated 70% or more have mandatory eligibility. All other veterans are eligible on a resource and space-available basis.

Question: Are women veterans eligible for unique benefits?

Answer: Women veterans are eligible for the same Medical Benefit Package as all veterans. Any inpatient care or treatment required which is not available at the preferred treatment facility will be obtained through other facilities or through community health care facilities.

Question: Am I eligible for travel benefits in the VA Health Care System?

Answer: Travel benefits vary from veteran to veteran and depend on your specific situation. Call (713) 794-7630 to find out more.

Question: If enrolled, can I get dental care?

Answer: In general, dental benefits are limited to service-connected dental

conditions or to veterans who have a VA 100% service-connected disability rating.

Question: Am I eligible for free prescriptions?

Answer: If you are being provided treatment, necessary prescriptions will also be provided. A \$7 copayment is charged for each prescription provided for the treatment of a nonservice-connected disability. Exemptions from this copayment requirement are provided for veterans service-connected 50% or more and for veterans whose income is less than the established dollar threshold.

Question: What do I do if I run out of medicine and my next appointment is a month away?

Answer: Veterans can contact their Primecare Nurse at their Primecare Clinic to obtain prescription renewals. If you do not know who your Primecare Team or Primecare Nurse is, call the VA Network Telecare Center at (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1 (800) 639-5137.

Question: How do I obtain a copy of my Report of Separation from Active Duty (DD-214)?

Answer: The Department of Veterans Affairs does not maintain records of veteran's military service, except as is necessary for providing benefits. For information about obtaining your military record, please visit the Military Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, which is part of the National Archives and Records Administration, on the Internet at www.nara.gov/regional/mpr.html. The VA regional office, at 1-800-827-1000, can also send you the necessary request form.

Question: How/where do I apply for health care?

Answer: You can apply for VA health care enrollment by completing VA Form 10-10EZ. The 10-10EZ may be obtained by visiting, calling, or writing any VA health care facility or veterans' benefits office. You can also call toll-free 1-877-222-VETS (1-877-222-8387) or access the form on the Internet at www.10-10EZ.med.va.gov. You can submit a completed form in person or by mail. Please be sure to sign your application form, otherwise it cannot be processed for enrollment. VA Form 10-10EZ is a one-page application form, front and back. Most veterans are able to complete the form in less than 15 minutes.

Question: Can I apply for VA compensation, pension, and education benefits online?

Answer: Yes. Visit the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Online Applications Web site at <http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp>.

Question: Is there an address where I can email my VA benefit questions?

Answer: Yes, send your email questions to houston.query@vba.va.gov.

Question: I don't have insurance, will VA still treat me?

Answer: Yes, whether a veteran has or does not have insurance plays no role in determining whether that individual is eligible for VA health care benefits.

Question: Why should I provide my insurance information to VA?

Answer: If you are a Priority 7 veteran, providing us your insurance information will allow us to bill your insurance carrier,

which will offset part or all of your copayment. The law requires VA to bill private health insurance companies for all nonservice-connected care a veteran receives. VA's budget and your future care could depend on the amount VA is able to collect from private health insurance carriers. By not giving us insurance information you may be limiting your future care and that of many other veterans.

Question: What is a VA Burial Allowance?

Answer: A VA Burial Allowance is a partial reimbursement of an eligible veteran's burial and funeral costs. When the cause of death is not service-related, the reimbursement is generally described as two payments: (1) a burial and funeral expense allowance, and (2) a plot interment allowance.

Question: How can I apply a VA Burial Allowance?

Answer: You can apply by filling out VA Form 21-530, Application for Burial Allowance. You should attach proof of the veteran's military service (DD 214), a death certificate, and copies of funeral and burial bills you have paid. Mail the completed form and documents to the Houston VA Regional Office, Department of Veterans Affairs, Attn: VA Burial Allowance, 6900 Alameda Road, Houston, Texas 77030. For more information, call toll-free 1-800-827-1000.

Question: How can I find out about job openings with the VA and other government agencies?

Answer: Visit the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Web site at <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov>. USAJOBS is the Federal Government's official one-stop source for Federal jobs and employment information.

Question: What's the easiest way to get my prescriptions refilled?

Answer: Call the HVAMC Pharmacy Refill line at (713) 794-7648 or toll free at 1 (800) 454-1062. You will need your social security number and your prescription number.

Question: If I have a medical question on the weekend, how can I get an answer?

Answer: Call the VA Network Telecare Center at (713) 794-8985 or toll free 1 (800) 639-5137. The VA Network Telecare Center is a new program recently developed to increase access to medical care for veterans throughout VISN 16. Veterans, their families, and significant others can talk to an experienced and knowledgeable registered professional nurse 24 hours a day/7 days a week.

Question: How can I order VA's "Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents" handbook?

Answer: Contact the Government Printing Office at 866-512-1800 or 202-512-1800 for mail-order information. The cost is \$5 to U.S. addresses. The handbook can be downloaded for free from the VA Web site at www.va.gov/opa/feature.

Question: Who is eligible for VA Disability Compensation?

Answer: You may be eligible for Disability Compensation if you have a service-related disability and you were discharged under other than dishonorable conditions. Call the VA Regional Office toll-free at 1-800-827-1000 for more information.

Important VA Telephone Numbers

Houston VA Medical Center Main Line	(713) 791-1414
or toll-free 1-800-553-2278	
VA Network Telecare Center.....	(713) 794-8985
or toll-free 1-800-639-5137	
Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic	(409) 981-8550
or toll-free 1-800-833-7734	
Lufkin VA Outpatient Clinic	(936) 637-1342
or toll-free 1-800-209-3120	
Pharmacy Refills	(713) 794-7648
or toll-free 1-800-454-1062	
Pharmacy Helpline	(713) 794-7653
Appointment Information	(713) 794-7648
or toll-free 1-800-454-1062	
VA Eligibility & Enrollment	(713) 794-7288
Patient Education Resource Center (PERC)	(713) 794-7856
VA Police	(713) 794-7106
Vet Center (Post Oak Road)	(713) 682-2288
Vet Center (Westheimer)	(713) 523-0884
Patient Representatives	
Houston	(713) 794-7884
Beaumont.....	1-800-833-7734
	extension 113
Lufkin	(936) 633-2753
Houston National Cemetery	(281) 447-8686
VA Regional Office	
Main Number	1-800-827-1000
Compensation/Pension	1-800-827-1000
Home Loans	1-888-232-2571
Education.....	1-888-442-4551
Insurance	1-800-669-8477
Headstones and Markers	1-800-697-6947